

Anwaruddin Choudhury

The **BIRDS**
of **ASSAM**



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The **BIRDS**
of Assam



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The BIRDS of Assam

Anwaruddin Choudhury

*Line drawings, Photographs & Cartography
by the author*



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Dedicated to the
memory of my grandparents & elder brother

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Common Sandpiper

NE
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CHAJI

Cover: A Great Pied Hornbill *Buceros bicornis*

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PREFACE

My book *Checklist of the Birds of Assam* (1990) was a preliminary step in documenting the fascinating and rich diversity of birdlife of Assam. This book is an attempt to document the bird species found in the state with up-to-date details accompanied by a revised checklist and a comprehensive bibliography.

I spent most of my childhood in Shillong, Guwahati and Hailakandi, where I used to see birds both in the wild as well as brought home by hunters. However, it was in the early 1980s that the childhood interest turned into scientific study. During the past two decades, especially after joining the Assam Civil Service, I have had the good fortune to traverse through all the 23 districts of Assam. Although at times I had to move as an administrator, as a magistrate for law and order, and a researcher in search of primates, but always at heart as a keen birdwatcher. While Guwahati continues to be my permanent headquarters, my transfers to Sibsagar (1987-88), Dhakuakhana (1989 -91), Diphu (1991-92), Tinsukia (1992-94) and North Lakhimpur (1994 -95), and deputation to The Rhino Foundation for nature in NE India (NGO; 1995-96) gave me wide opportunity to carry-out year-round studies in the field with minimum problem.

I started working on this book in 1991 while at Diphu and it took me almost nine years to complete, as I had to revise it several times. Most of the line drawings were made at Diphu Circuit House in 1991-92, and mapping in 1991-92 and 1999-2000.

Although the classification and nomenclature followed by me is basically that of Ripley (1961), and Ali & Ripley (1983) with some deviations, it is an apparent reality that enormous changes have taken place in the taxonomy of birds. The DNA technique of classification (Sibley & Monroe, 1990) with further changes may become the basis for future (details in 'Introduction'). In the text, I often used the term 'restricted range species', which may not be in conformity with Stattersfield *et al.* (1998). However, latter has been referred to in the Checklist (Chapter 7).

I acknowledge with gratitude a large number of people including Forest officials and staff, villagers, NGO activists, and officials of various other departments for their help during field works. Sincere thanks are due to Prof. Mohd. Taher, P.K.Bora, Ashok Saikia, Prof. Hiren Gohain, Dr A.R.Rahmani, late Narayan Sarmah, Anam Majumder, Jayashree Daolagupu, Goutam Ganguly, and Dhruva Hazarika for their suggestions and encouragement. Others who deserve mention are Zafar-ul-Islam, Ratul Talukdar, Prasanta Saikia, Kulojyoti Lahkar, Mridupaban Phukan, Maan Barua, Bhuram Gogoi, Paniram Das, Nur Husain, Sarsing Rongphar, Hakim, Late Sakul Boro, Shirai Laskar, Fulmon Kurmi, Tomu and Carol & Tim Inskipp. Ms Emily Chowdhary, the then Development Commissioner for Hill Areas, who was very keen on birds was always a source of inspiration.

On any work on wildlife of Assam, mention must be made of two recent political personalities whose interest has helped declaration of many new protected areas. They are late Nagen Sharma, former Forest Minister of Assam, and Mr Jotson Bey, former CEM of Karbi Anglong. For the last two decades, I maintained close interaction with many political personalities to garner support for new protected areas (as their support is essential) but never before I got such positive and practical understanding as these two. I sincerely express my gratitude to them.

Special thanks are due to Dr Anil Kr Goswami, Member-Secretary of WWF-India North-East Regional Office, for joining hands in publishing this important document on the bird diversity of Assam. My thanks too to my parents, wife, other relatives, friends and other well wishers who gave me the benefit of their advice.

INTRODUCTION

More than 900 species and subspecies of birds have been recorded in Assam. These include some 280 winter migrants from the northern latitudes. This richness and diversity in bird species is due to the fact that north-eastern India is the meeting place of two zoogeographic sub-regions, the Indian and the Indo-Chinese within the framework of Oriental (or Indomalayan) Zoo-geographic Region.

Although, the Indo-Myanmarese political boundary is often considered (for convenience!) as the border between the two sub-regions, the faunal distribution shows that it is the Brahmaputra River which is perhaps the dividing line. This is well illustrated by the distribution of mammals. The Hoolock gibbon *Hylobates hoolock*, Pig-tailed macaque *Macaca nemestrina* and the Stump-tailed macaque *M. arctoides* are restricted to the south of the Brahmaputra only (Choudhury, 1989d). However, the movement of avifauna cannot be restricted completely by the rivers and hence, birds of both the sub-regions blend into each other with recessions on either side. Assam is part of a global biodiversity 'hotspot' (Myers, 1988, 1991) as well as two Endemic Bird Areas, i.e., Eastern Himalaya, and Assam Plains (Collar *et al*, 1994; Stattersfield *et al*, 1998).

Of the 20 orders of birds found in Assam, 12 contain 'Threatened' and 11 'Near-threatened' species. The following orders have more than five threatened and near-threatened species each: Passeriformes 44, Falconiformes 15, Anseriformes nine, Ciconiiformes and Charadriiformes eight each. The orders of birds that have the highest percentage of threatened and near-threatened species are: Pelecaniformes (43%), Galliformes (37%), Bucerotiformes (33%), Ciconiiformes (26%) and Anseriformes (25%).

Geographic background

Assam is located in the north-eastern part of India (24°09' - 27°58' N, 89°42' - 96°01' E). The state is bounded by Bhutan on the north-west, Arunachal Pradesh in the north and north-east, Nagaland in the east, Manipur in

the south-east, Mizoram in the south, Tripura and Meghalaya in the south-west, and small areas of West Bengal in the west and Bangladesh in the west and south-west (Fig.1). Assam covers an area of 78,500 km² and is divided into 23 districts. The total population is about 26 million. The present state excludes areas such as Naga Hills (present Nagaland state), Khasi Hills, Garo Hills, Jaintia Hills (all three in present Meghalaya state), Mizo Hills (present Mizoram state) and NEFA (present Arunachal Pradesh), which were often referred to in various works on birdlife in the past as part of Assam.

Physiographically, the major parts of Assam are plains with the Brahmaputra valley accounting for more than 60% of the total area of the state. The Brahmaputra River flows through the valley in an east-west course. A large number of tributaries join the river from both the banks. The main north bank tributaries (all snow-fed and originating in the Himalaya or trans-Himalaya) are the Subansiri, Ranga, Dikrong, Jia-Bhoreli, Manas, and Sankosh. In the south, the rivers are not snow-fed and originate in the hills. The main tributaries are the Burhi-Dihing, Disang, Dikhow, Dhansiri, Kopili, and Kulsi. Two major rivers also join the Brahmaputra in eastern Assam, these are the Dibang (snow-fed, originating in the Mishmi Hills) and the Lohit (snow-fed, originating in south-eastern Tibet). The other plain area is in the south, the valley of the Barak River. This river originates from the Barail Range in Manipur. Its main tributaries are the Jiri, Chiri, Madhura, Jatinga, Sonai, Katakhal, Dhaleswari, Shingla and Longai. Near Badarpur, it

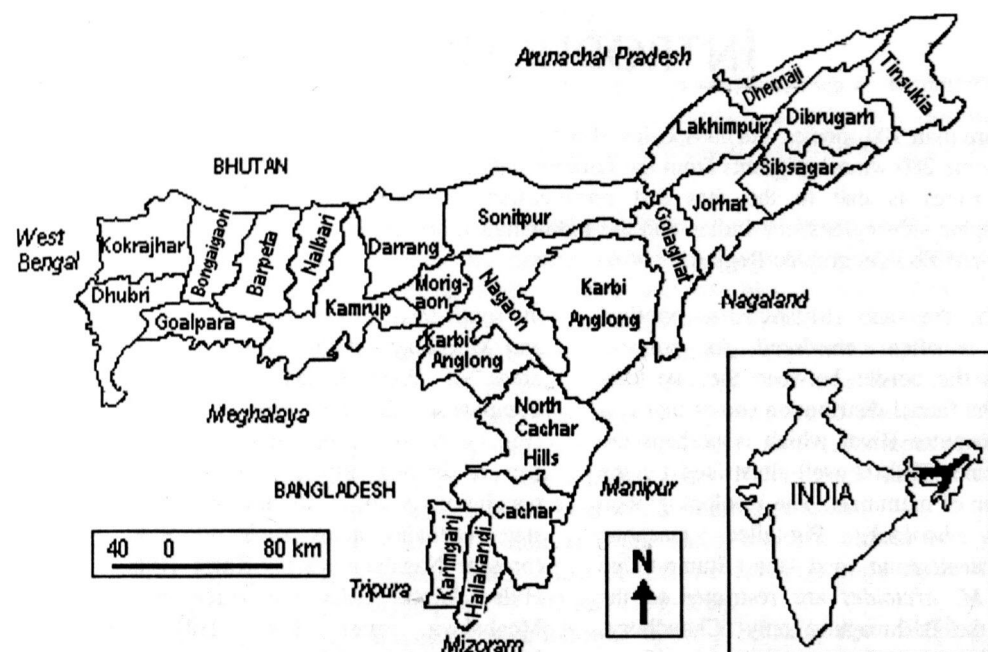


Fig. 1. Assam: showing the location and districts.

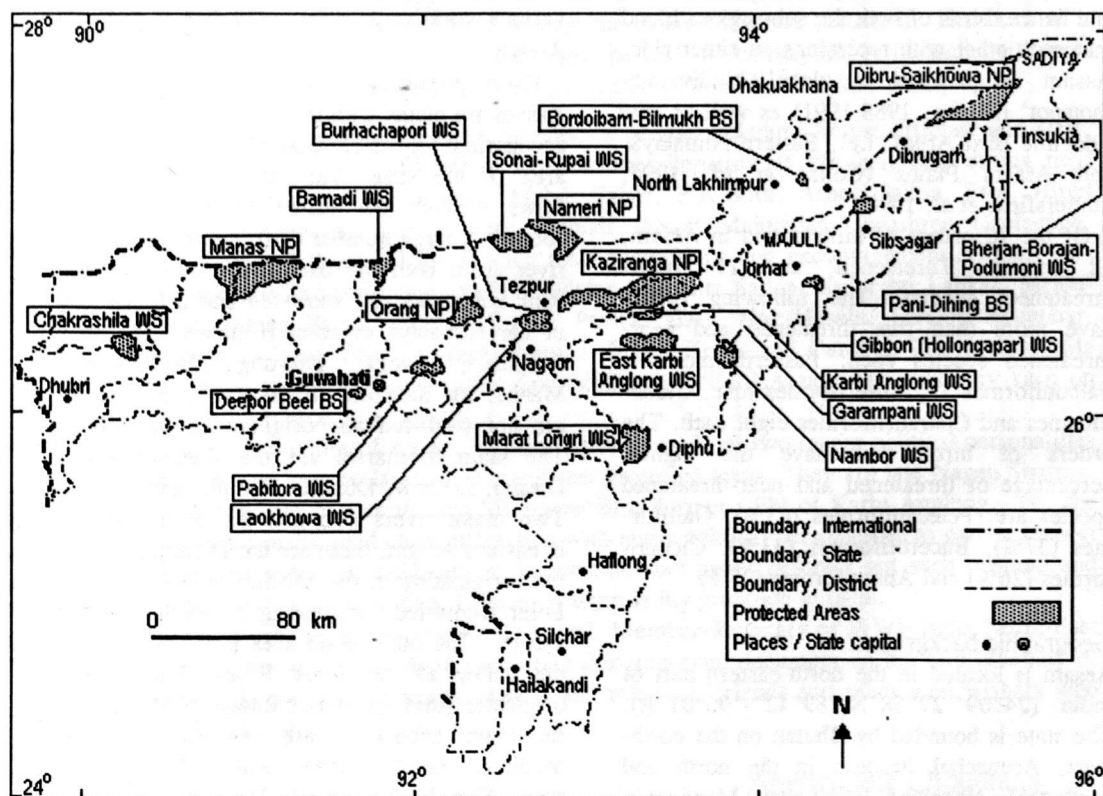


Fig. 2. Assam: important places and Protected Areas.

bifurcates into two, namely the Surma and the Kushiyara Rivers and ultimately meets the Meghna River in Bangladesh.

The main hilly areas cover N.C.Hills, parts of Cachar and Karbi Anglong. The Barail Range, which covers parts of Cachar and N.C.Hills is the highest hill range in Assam with some parts rising above 1900 m elevation. The whole of Karbi Anglong and parts of north-western N.C.Hills are part of an Archaean plateau (called here as Karbi Plateau, a part of Meghalaya Plateau).

Throughout the state, a large number of wetlands in the form of *beels* and *haors* are found. These are common in the floodplain zone of the rivers. The major *beels* of the state are listed in Table 2.

The climate of Assam is largely tropical 'monsoon' type with a hot wet summer and a cool dry winter. Winter rains are also not uncommon. Annual rainfall of the state varies from less than 1000 mm to more than 6000 mm. The lowest rainfall occurs in parts of central Assam covering southern Nagaon (Lanka-Lumding area), northern N.C.Hills (Langting-Mandardisa area) and southern Karbi Anglong (Diphu-Kheroni area), which is, in fact, a rain shadow area. The temperature generally ranges from 7°C in winter (minimum) to 35°C in summer (maximum) (range: 5°-38°C). On the high peaks of the Barail Range (above 1800 m), the temperature may go down to below 2°C on some winter days.

Aim and scope of the book

The purpose of this book is to make available an up-to-date guide-cum-reference with a current status report on the birds of Assam. All species recorded or reported within the geographic limits of Assam up to the end of July 2000 have been listed in the chapter 7 (Checklist). Most of the globally 'threatened', 'near-threatened' (Collar *et al.*, 1994), regionally threatened and rarer species (58) have been described in details in chapter 5 (Species Accounts) while brief notes on some more (161 species), including new additions and other significant records given in chapter 6 (Notes on Some Other Species).

The species accounts are divided into separate sections on distribution, ecology, historical status, population, conservation and remarks. The common English and scientific names are followed by local names. In the illustrations, the standard biologists' symbols, the arrow of Mars ♂ for male, and the mirror of Venus ♀ for female have been used, especially where sexes differ significantly. The same has also been used in the measurements. The sizes of the birds (given immediately after the names) are the length, from tip of bill to tip of tail of the birds laid flat on their back with neck extended normally. These measurements are always relative and not exact.

Nomenclature

The classification and nomenclature used is basically that of the *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan* (Ali & Ripley, 1983) with deviations wherever felt necessary on the basis of recent research. A great amount of confusion prevails in the use of sequence in view of recent publications such as *An Annotated Checklist of the Birds of the Oriental Region* (Inskipp *et al.*, 1996), and *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent* (Grimmett *et al.*, 1998), which have followed Sibley & Monroe (1990). The sequence of these differ radically from the one based on Wetmore (1930), followed by Ripley (1961; this also provided the taxonomic basis for the *Handbook*). I preferred the 'standard' sequence to avoid confusion and as the new one is yet to be accepted universally. Grimmett *et al.* (1998) themselves admitted that it might confuse many readers. In a recent review also it has been criticised (Leivo, 1999), however, it should be noted that no single sequence is likely to be universally accepted.

The first time a species is mentioned in a chapter, its scientific name follows the English name. Subsequently only the English names have been given.

The following abbreviations have been used:-

A = Assamese, spoken in most of the Brahmaputra valley districts

AUC = Anwaruddin Choudhury (references to the unpublished materials of author).

AWC = Asian Waterfowl Census

B = Bengali, especially the dialect spoken in Cachar, Karimganj, and Hailakandi Districts

Baker = E.C. Stuart Baker

BNHS = Bombay Natural History Society

°C = Degree Celsius

CITES = Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species

dist. = District

E = East

IUCN = World Conservation Union (formerly International Union for Conservation of Nature & Natural Resources)

km = Kilometre

LN = Local name

m = Metre

N = North

N.C.Hills = North Cachar Hills district

NE = North-east

NP = National Park

NW = North-west

pc = Personal communication

R. = River

RF = Reserved Forest

S = South

SE = South-east

SW = South-west

TR = Tiger Reserve

W = West

WPA = The Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972

WS = Wildlife Sanctuary

Full name of persons referred to in the text (as pc) are:

A. Hazarika = Asif Hazarika

A. Majid Choudhury = Abdul Majid Choudhury of Hasiura

A.R. Rahmani = Dr Asad Rahmani

B. Dey = Bablu Dey

B. Goswami = Bikul Goswami

B. Talukdar = Bibhav Talukdar

D. Phukan = Debojit Phukan

F. Ahmed = Firoz Ahmed

G. Chhetri = Gajen Chhetri

K. Lahkar = Kulojyoti Lahkar

M. Barua = Maan Barua

M. Phukan = Mridupaban Phukan

N. Husain = Nur Husain

N. Sarmah = Late Narayan Sarmah

P. Alström = Per Alström

P. B. Bhattacharjee = Phani Bhusan Bhattacharjee of Roopachara TE

P.K. Bora = Pranab Kr Bora

P. Bordoloi = Prasanta Bordoloi

P. Mahanta = Promode Mahanta

P. Saikia = Prasanta Saikia






P. Sharma = Pankaj Sharma

S. Chanda = Subhash Chanda

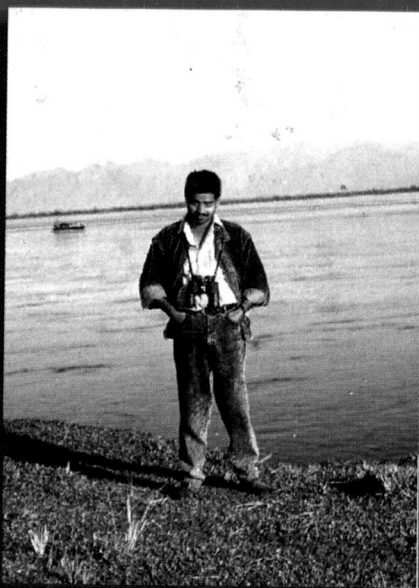
One protected area or RF is treated as one locality irrespective of size. Coordinates mentioned in the tables are exact in case of specific sites. In cases where an entire protected area or a group of contiguous adjacent forests are mentioned, it is generally the middle-point of the area.

Local names in some other languages have also been used, but their use is limited to a few cases only, mainly in the species accounts and hence, full name is given in parenthesis. These include Dimasa Kachari (mainly spoken in N.C.Hills and parts of Cachar districts), Karbi (formerly Mikir, mainly spoken in Karbi Anglong dist), Mising (formerly Miri, mainly spoken in parts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Jorhat [Majuli area] and Tinsukia districts), Bodo (mainly spoken in *bhabar-terai* belt and just south of it, especially in the *Duars*), Khasi (in Assam-Meghalaya border; also in parts of N.C.Hills and Cachar), Hmar (in parts of N.C.Hills and Cachar) and Thadou (in parts of N.C.Hills). Both the Hmar and Thadou belong to the Kuki group of tribes.

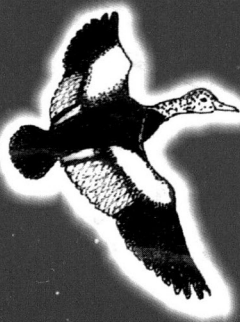
Key to the Distribution Maps

-  Resident
-  Winter visitor / Passage migrant
-  Former distribution (*approx.* 1950s)
-  Individual records, past
-  Individual records, recent

THE BIRDS OF ASSAM is an up-to-date guide-cum-reference with current status report on the avi-fauna of the area. This is also the most comprehensive publication on the birds of the region. Most of the globally 'threatened', 'near-threatened', regionally threatened and rarer species have been described in details with brief notes on 161 species, including new additions and other significant records. All the species recorded or reported within the geographic limits of the state have been listed in the Checklist. The text is supported by more than 400 distribution maps and illustrations (line drawings & photographs), all being the work of a single person. Major wetlands, grasslands and all the protected areas have been listed with baseline data. The text is followed by a bibliography and full indexes to both English and scientific names.



Dr Anwaruddin Choudhury (42) has studied the birds of northeastern India for nearly two decades. He is an MA with Gold Medal in Geography and a Ph.D. on Primatology. He is an Assam Civil Service officer and worked in various capacities such as Magistrate, SDO (civil), Addl Deputy Commissioner, Project Director of DRDA, Deputy Secretary (Forest Dept) and Joint Secretary. Presently he is the Director of Tea, Assam. He is also the Founder Chief Executive of The Rhino Foundation for nature in NE India (NGO) and is a member of IUCN/SSC Water Bird, Asian Rhino, Cat, and Small Carnivore Specialist Groups, IUCN/SSC/WI Threatened Waterfowl Specialist Group and the New York Academy of Sciences. To date he has published c. 300 articles & scientific papers in nine countries, and eight books & monographs. His other interests are wildlife & nature photography (exhibited at Guwahati, 1999; Calcutta, Siliguri, 2000), cartography, philately and drawing (exhibited in the State Art Gallery, Guwahati, 1978) among others.



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